

Going outside the gate

By Jeff Barneson
Charles River Church
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Powered by God for life.

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. ¹² And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³ Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. ¹⁴ For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Hebrews 13:11-16

Have you ever met Jesus? Maybe you've been asked this question by one of those wild street evangelists. In my work as a campus chaplain, I ask people that same question – “Have you ever met Jesus?” How? Where did it happen?

You know, it always amazes me when I hear all the different ways that people meet and later come to follow Jesus. And I'm not just talking about drug-induced visions or seeing the profile of the Carpenter of Nazareth on a calzone. I'm talking about a real, living, person – not a ghost, or myth or even a collective hallucination in a deeply disappointed religious sect from the first century.

Some of my friends met Jesus when they were at the bottom, in a time of great personal crisis and struggle. Others heard him speak to them in the midst of a crippling illness. C.S. Lewis once wrote that God shouts in our pain. I think that's probably true. But maybe you're like me -- you first met Jesus at church. Maybe right here at the MATCH School. If this is you, if you first met Jesus at church, maybe you, like me, have sensed that there is more to him than you've experienced at the annual potluck. Maybe you, like me, long to know more of him.

On the other hand, maybe you've never met Jesus and you wonder at those of us who claim to talk with him and struggle to follow him with our lives. Maybe you're curious. If you are, I think this text from the Letter to the Hebrews might help because it reminds us of another place where we meet Jesus...

Before we really get going, let's talk about the context here, animal sacrifice... We don't have time to go into all the details. What is important to know is that, long ago, what began with animals being slaughtered to pay for sin, rebellion and rejection of God and his ways, God completed in Jesus. In fact, Jesus was the real sacrifice for sin that the animal sacrifices were pointing to for all those years. It was his death that paid the price for sin, for the sins of the world. It says he died to make us “holy” – to set us apart as his own. Killing all those animals was only the pre-game show.

One problem with the whole sacrificial system – or maybe this was God's intent all along – was that it was incredibly messy. Killing all those animals and disposing of their bodies was a huge problem. So this is what they did (v. 11)...*The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp.* And when they finally built the temple in Jerusalem, they tossed and burned the bodies of the animals “outside the gate” in the dump.

Historians and scholars have identified this place. In Jesus' time it was called *Gehenna* and it's where they took all the trash from the city of Jerusalem. It wasn't a pretty spot. It was filthy and had a horrible history. During the reigns of Kings Ahaz and Manasseh it had been a site of pagan worship, and even child sacrifice – they used to kill their babies and leave their tiny bodies “outside the gate.” Somehow, they had gotten it in their heads, maybe since this was the custom in Assyria and other nations, that this was something God wanted – Even though God told them in 2 Kings, chapter 16 “I never told you to do that!” By the time the letter to the Hebrews was sent, everybody knew about *Gehenna* – the perpetually-burning city dump that served as the figure for hell.

What I find most interesting in this section is that this place, “Outside the gate,” is where it says Jesus suffered and died. In my mind's eye it's always been different. Whether it was from the movies of Cecil B. DeMille, Franco Zeffereilli, or even Mel Gibson's “Passion of the Christ,” I've always pictured Jesus dying up on a hill – like it says in that hymn that some of us grew up singing, “On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross...” Sometimes I think of the place where we are told Jesus died, *Golgotha*, or *the skull*, and remember

one film which showed just that – three crosses, silhouetted against the sky, on a rocky outcropping that looked like a skull.

But the historical reality is probably very different. It is likely that Golgotha got its name because it was a place of death – the place of *skulls* – where the bodies were tossed. The place where Jesus died probably didn't look much different from the dumps we find today outside virtually any so-called third-world city. Dumps have always been places we toss both the physical garbage as well as the human refuse of society. So if you go to the dump in Jakarta, Tijuana, Port au Prince or San Salvador it's pretty much the same. You find mothers and children scrounging for glass, scraps of metal and half-rotten food. But what Hebrews 13 tells us is that you find Jesus there as well.

So what do we do with this passage? Well, you probably don't need a degree in New Testament exegesis to figure out the most important thing to do:

Go to Him – Outside the camp.

We are told to go to Jesus – to join him in the dump. How does this work? When this was written, 30-40 years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, he was already long gone, so what could it mean to go to him? There's a bit of a clue from Matthew 25, when the King separates the sheep from the goats. If you've heard the passage, you may remember the response of the righteous...

"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

It's like Jesus is present in some particular and mysterious way with the poor. When people are thrown away – That's where we are invited to go because that's where Jesus is – with the least, the last and the lost. In his day-to-day work you could usually find him with the sick, the blind, the lame, the insane, the possessed. He went around touching lepers and defending women accused of adultery. He went out of his way to hang with Samaritans (those who were ethnically different) and was a frequent guest at the homes of well-known sinners.

You want to meet Jesus, the Bible asks? He's right over there, with the disappointed, the abandoned, the abused. He's with the failures. Go on over, it says, he's just "outside the gate."

Sounds easy enough, right? But we might not always be sure where the gates are. I often don't know. And even when I think I do, I usually feel reluctant or incapable of going there. So how do we know when we are outside the gate, and how do we get there despite our reluctance?

There are three instructions that help...

First, Bear the Disgrace of Jesus

You may have noticed that spending time with Jesus can feel dangerous. Hebrews says, when we start to hang around Jesus, if we start spending time with him and the sort of folks that he spent time with, we'll get a bit of a reputation. If we join him with those who suffer in the dump, we'll get their reputation as well. Sometimes it's subtle. We may hear things like, "She had so much potential before she got involved with those people and their problems" or "His poor family, after all they gave up for him to go to BU or MIT, just look at how he's wasting his life."

You get the idea... You'll be thought of as foolish or maybe, a troublemaker. People will question your motives; they may question your sanity. If you don't exercise your degree or talents in manner that society defines "success," you may even be a disappointment to your family. After spending 17 years in campus ministry, I got a Masters degree from the Kennedy school. On the way home from the ceremony, my mother said, "Maybe you can get a real job now."

But it's not just what someone thinks of us. For everyone who thinks you're nuts to bag your PhD program at Harvard and go to New Orleans to help with reconstruction, as my friend Candice did, or to move to Uganda as my friend Stephanie (here tonight) did, someone else thinks you are noble and heroic. In

those cases, the disgrace may come elsewhere. Identifying the ways that you feel disgraced can help you know if you are outside the gates. Isn't this job *beneath* me? Is that person too embarrassing to be seen with? If I share that opinion publicly, won't people think I'm a freak?

Entering places of disgrace is difficult, but it's important. Because it's not just that disgrace is a sign that you are outside the gates, it is also one of the means God uses to pour out his grace on you, to call you to him in new ways and to enable you to be in the dump. The text shows us a bit of how this happens – bearing disgrace helps us recognize that our citizenship is elsewhere. Our true address is in a different city. My catalogues and mortgage bills come to 13 Valentine Street, but I really belong someplace else.

The big trouble is for me, and maybe you, is that I'm pretty happy with it here. I'm satisfied. My city might not be perfect, but at least it's mine.

It's sort of ironic that the people who spend the most time outside the gate, in the dump, don't seem to struggle with this in the same way that I do. The mothers and children who live there are clear about where their true citizenship is found.

Some of you know that in recent years I have been privileged to work with graduate students and faculty in several places "outside the gate." We have built homes with widows and children in the highlands of Guatemala and with *campesinos* in Honduras. We have worked on schools for handicapped children in the shanty towns of Lima and helped a Haitian pastor in start a business and build a bakery in a mountain community near Port a Prince. For 7 years we've been involved with men and women incarcerated in Bolivia and Ecuador, and in the last year I've been to India, New Orleans, and Mexico.

In each of those places, I've been profoundly challenged by those who follow Jesus there. They have no trouble recognizing that here "there is no enduring city." Nothing material can command their devotion and no person or government can demand their allegiance, because they are devoted to and looking for the "city which is to come."

I'm not saying that we need to pull out of the MATCH School, move to Calcutta and set up clinics (although I'm not promising God won't call us to do that). You remember in Jeremiah, when Israel went into captivity into Babylon, God said that you should build houses and live in them, raise your families, work for the good of that land. "BUT," he said, "never forget that this is NOT YOUR HOME." You may live in Allston or Brookline or Cambridge or Somerville. You might even live in Weston or in Louisberg Square on Beacon Hill. But this is not your home.

If you, like me, have trouble remembering where your true city is located, pray for both small and dramatic ways to bear his disgrace outside the camp. Bearing his disgrace, he will remind you that we are looking for a new city, the City of God, the New Jerusalem

The second instruction is...

Second, Praise God

He says that we are to *offer a sacrifice of praise*. This isn't easy – otherwise, it wouldn't be a sacrifice – sacrifice always costs us something.

Praising God can be difficult for a bunch of reasons. Sometimes our own pain, or the pain of the world just seems too great to praise God. You know, if you *google* the "pictures, people, garbage, and dumps" together you get over 3,580,000 hits. We take a look around at the way things are and conclude that it's just too bleak, too wrong, too broken and sinful to praise God. Where is he anyway?

I remember feeling that way a couple years ago when I was attending national meetings for InterVarsity. At the end of painful accounts of the ravages of AIDS in Africa, we heard reports from student groups and staff working in Indonesia detailing problems after the tsunami. (Remember the tsunami?)

Well, after these reports, the worship team came back up and began a quiet song of praise to God. I stood up with the rest but I couldn't sing. How could I praise God with all that destruction? How could I praise him when 2/3rds of those who died were children? The capper for me came when one of my colleagues, Gerry Rodman, began to lead us, over 1000 of us, in prayer. She prayed for those who were displaced, who lost their homes, who lost those they love. Then she prayed for children and for the gangs that have been rounding them up, kidnapping them and selling them as sex slaves. And do you know what my

colleague prayed? She prayed like David, “Rise up O God, break off their hands!” And the band and then the congregation took up the chant, “Rise up O God, break off their hands. Rise up O God, break off their hands.”

That was when I remembered what we were doing and why we offer a sacrifice of praise. No one ever said it would be easy, or fun, or personally satisfying to praise God. (Praise God anyway...Not for the tsunami, but for who He is.) When it feels like a sacrifice to praise, this is a sign that you have gone outside the camp, with your body or maybe just with your heart and prayers. But it's not just a sign, offering praise is a means for God to pour out the grace necessary for us stay there and be with him. My friends across the river at Pentecostal Tabernacle sing it this way, “Don't you know what praise is for? It's an instrument of war!” We praise Him because we can't stay in the dump, or do anything that is of eternal value there, without Him.

The final instruction is another sacrifice...

Third, Give to Others Sacrificially

We are called to do good and share with others. This is a whole sermon so I'll just say a couple things. First, for followers of Jesus, the tithe (traditionally thought of as 10% of our income) is just the starting point – it's sort of the entry level for our giving. Sadly, too many of us don't take even that kind of giving seriously. We don't pray, plan and take care in our giving – sometimes it feels like we're reaching into our wallets for a couple bucks to throw God a tip.

And for most Americans, there is a direct relationship between income and lifestyle. The more money they make, the better, more lavishly they live. More often than not, this is true whether the person calls themselves a Christian or not. We don't look significantly different from the world – The more we make, the more we spend on... ourselves.

If the instruction to give sacrificially is like the others, then it will be a sign that we've gone outside the gate. It's hard to continue to spend so much on ourselves when we've experienced the suffering of others. Going outside the gate is a powerful corrective to our rampant consumerism. It may help us break the tie between income and lifestyle.

Like the other instructions, though, giving sacrificially is more than a sign. It is a means of grace to meet Jesus more deeply. It allows us to stay in the dump with Jesus and be a part of his redemptive story there. There are plenty of stories in the gospels about guys (come to think of it they are all guys!) who are holding onto their stuff so tight that they can't go with Jesus; they never really get to know him; and they never get in on his amazing work.

One particularly earnest young man came running up to Jesus only to leave sadly when Jesus told him to sell what he had, give the money to the poor and come and follow him. Of course most of the preaching we hear today is about why Jesus didn't really mean that. He was just trying, we're told, to help the guy get his attitude right toward his stuff. Maybe, but I doubt it.

I think that Jesus wants us to know him, and that all of our money and stuff literally gets in the way. Like my desk at home, or my comforting retirement account, some of it just needs to get cleared out.

I wonder what would have happened if, instead of leaving, the young man had said, “Hmmm... That's a big step for me right now and I'm not sure I can do it. Would it be alright if I hung around you all for a while and see if I can do it in the future?” I don't know, but I have a hard time thinking that Jesus would turn away that sort of honesty and vulnerability. I certainly hope not, because that's where I am.

That's where I am with all of these instructions in fact. I've taken steps toward Jesus outside the camp, baby steps maybe, but steps none-the-less. And each time, Jesus has led me deeper into relationship with him, using the graces described in this passage. I pray that he continues to do so. And I pray he does the same for you all.

Amen.